open wide our hearts
the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

Examining Our Subconscious Perceptions

As Catholics, we are united across the human limits of nation, culture, race and sex due to our Baptism, which makes us members of the Body of Christ and thus "members one of another" (CCC 1267, quoting Eph. 4:25). But because of sin, we can sometimes fail to recognize the dignity of some members of our human family, even subconsciously (CCC 814).

In *Open Wide Our Hearts,* the bishops write:

> *Racism can often be found in our hearts – in many cases placed there unwillingly or unknowingly by our upbringing and culture. As such, it can lead to thoughts and actions that we do not even see as racist, but nonetheless flow from the same prejudicial root. Consciously or subconsciously, this attitude of superiority can be seen in how certain groups of people are vilified, called criminals, or are perceived as being unable to contribute to society, even unworthy of its benefits.*

The following activity can help illustrate how we can easily create subconscious connections or associations. thoughts are often based on words, people, or objects that we commonly associate with each other. Quickly (in a few seconds or less per question) fill in the blanks below using the first word that comes to mind after you read each prompt.[i] Do the activity as quickly as possible, to see what associations immediately come to mind. If you can't think of a word right away, skip it and come back to it:

1. Macaroni and _____.
2. Pins and _____.
3. Peanut butter and _____.
4. Hide and _____.
5. Trick or _____.
6. Father, Son, and _____.
7. Night and _____.
8. Salt and _____.
9. Sugar and _____.
10. Sweet n' _____.

Did you automatically associate some words with others? Just as we associate salt with pepper, peanut butter with jelly, or trick with treat, stereotypes develop the same way. Our brains process information about people who are different from us—often based on TV shows, movies, or social media posts that depict ethnic groups in certain ways. We notice patterns and then generalize, taking mental short-cuts. These generalizations are what psychologists call "implicit bias." When we form these mental generalizations over and over and often see generalizations made in media sources biases form without our recognition.

Some racial stereotypes might seem harmless—for example, the common stereotype that certain ethnic groups are smart and serious. This could result in people from that group being treated differently or given unequal opportunity because of the judgements made about people with that ethnic background. For example, if it is assumed that one person is "good at math" because of his or her background, could that assumption preclude opportunities for work in a more creative field? Stereotypes, even when they seem complimentary, are never good because they do not honor people as individuals, created by God, with unique gifts and talents.

> *"Racism can often be found in our hearts – in many cases placed there unwillingly or unknowingly by our upbringing and culture."*
>
> – *U.S. bishops,* Open Wide Our Hearts

Implicit bias can have very real consequences. The bishops write: "Consciously or subconsciously, this attitude of superiority can be seen in how certain groups of people are vilified, called criminals, or are perceived as being unable to contribute to society, even unworthy of its benefits."

Here are some examples:

- In one study, when white, black and Latino applicants applied for entry-level jobs with equivalent résumés, the black applicants were half as likely as whites to receive a callback or job offer.
- In the same study, black and Latino applicants with no criminal records received callbacks and/or job offers at rates similar to white applicants just released from prison.
- In another study, college professors were 26 percent more likely to respond to an email from a student who said their name was "Brad," than an identical email signed "Lamar."

The above exercise can be informative in exploring one way that biases can become ingrained in our subconscious: As you watch your favorite TV shows or movies, identify and discuss any racial stereotypes you notice. How are people of various racial backgrounds portrayed? How might these stereotypes contribute to our biases?

Though stereotypes are often formed subconsciously, we can actively work to overcome them if we educate ourselves. Friendship and relationship are the best antidote for bias. We can also think about the media we consume. What media sources are frequented by people from other ethnic backgrounds?

True unity in Christ requires that we recognize subconscious perceptions and overcome them. Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "Holy Scripture boldly proclaims, 'See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are' (1 John 3:1). This love 'comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a "we" which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28)' (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18)."

Implicit bias is a sensitive and challenging topic. It may help to prayerful reflect in a prayer journal about the following questions:

- What attitudes or perceptions do you have about cultural ethnic groups outside of your own?
- Where do you think these attitudes or perceptions came from?
- What is an example of a way that you may have acted differently toward someone of another ethnic group because of implicit bias?
- How does bias and the way it causes us to act fail to respect the dignity of every child of God?
- What can you do to overcome your own biases?

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[i] Answer key for Word Associations activity: Macaroni and (Cheese); Pins and (Needles); Peanut butter and (Jelly); Hide and (Seek); Trick or (Treat); Father, Son and (Holy Spirit); Night and (Day); Salt and (Pepper); Sugar and (Spice); Sweet n' (Sour)